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ABSTRACT

Some of the similarities and differences in the news media coverage of the United States presidential campaign of 1980 are discussed in this paper. Among the differences related are the loss of the symbolic power of the primary elections, which forced the media to look for significant trends elsewhere; the mixture of politics with the entertainment media, best epitomized by cartoonist Garry Trudeau's endorsement of candidate John Anderson in his cartoon strip; and the candidates' return to the use of the "talking head" format for television spot commercials in preference to the "minidocumentary" spots of earlier campaigns. Among the similarities noted are the post-primary television news features and computerized vote projections, the use of candidates' pictures on the covers of national news magazines, the extended Sunday television interview programs featuring candidates, and the television spot commercial featuring celebrities. The paper then offers an explanation of the media coverage of the 1980 campaign based on the theory of James Barber, which holds that in presidential campaigns, a 12-year cycle exists consisting of three stages--"conflict," "consciousness," and "conciliation." (FL)

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The Status of Mass Media Coverage of Campaign '80

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The simplest and shortest answer to the question implied by the title of this paper -- "What is the status of mass media coverage of Campaign '80?" -- would be about one sentence long. One could say "About as bad as usual;" or "Not very exciting this year" or "Walter Cronkhite is just getting older". Though all those answers would be true, they would neither add up to a convention paper nor tell anyone about what the mass media has done in covering Campaign '80 since September, 1979 when all of the candidates that have come, gone, and remained throughout the primary season were officially announced. And the media has done a great deal. Consider this shift of political fortunes: In September of 1979, polls put Jimmy Carter's approval rate by voters at only 19% overall and at only 10% in economic matters -- the traditional pocketbook issues that pundits claim make or break candidates. In major primary states like New Hampshire, New York, Massachussets and California, the polls showed Jerry Brown giving Carter a close race and Ted Kennedy whipping the President. Ninety days later polls put the Carter approval rate at 60% and showed him handling the Kennedy challenge with a 20% margin and drubbing any of the Republicans head-to-head.[1] Jerry Brown

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had become more interesting as Linda Rondstadt's escort than as a candidate. And this past week Roper polls showed Ronald Reagan essentially neck and neck with the President were the election held today; thus cutting the ground from under the Bush and Anderson claims that a Reagan nomination would be a repeat of the debacle of 1964. Now of course the Iranian Crisis and the President's image of cool and quiet handling of it in the early days explains a part of the dramatic reversal but not all of it. Other factors included Kennedy's fluffs on the Roger Mudd interview, his early remarks on the Shah, and his early campaign performances as a stump speaker.[2] And of course both the crises and the Kennedy errors reached American public via mass media. So while one can easily describe the status of media coverage, you cannot so easily discount its impact in determining the shifting fortunes of various candidates whether you refer to a Kennedy or an Anderson or a Connelly who has apparently won only one delegate -- the single most expensive delegate in history as 10 million dollars were spent by the Connelly campaign for a total of one delegate. But to explain how the news media are covering this campaign in ways different from or similar to earlier campaigns is something else. I propose to describe some of those similarities and differences and then to sketch out a brief explanation of this year's media coverage.

One of the major differences between coverage of Campaign '80 and earlier campaigns is that the primaries have lost their once symbolic power. We now have 37 primaries, a much longer primary season, and very short time between them.[3] In earlier campaigns the media could feature the symbolic power of the primary. For example, JFK proved in the West Virginia primary that a Catholic can run well

in predominantly protestant areas. Gene MCarthy dealt a death blow to LBJ's Presidency by losing to the President by 20 some percentage points. And remember the symbolic power of Muskie's tearful win by too small a margin in New Hampshire? Or McGovern's upset of the frontrunners in Wisconsin, or even Jimmy Carter's early wins in non-Southern states? Then compare these symbolic events with Carter being defeated in New York and Massachussets yet still maintaining a commanding lead in the delegate count. The name of the game is no longer symbolic messages sent by the primary states where a majority of the delegates in both parties will be chosen. And mass media coverage is thus forced to focus on delegate counting. That makes their job tougher, especially so when we look at the long primary season and the task of keeping it interesting. This week is one of the few in which we haven't had a primary being held since the opening gun. And by the Wisconsin primary two weeks ago, on April Fool's Day ironically, it all seemed determined -- Carter versus Reagan. This forces the media to feature certain items and to play down others. We'll return to that a little later. Another difference between '80 and earlier campaigns is that we now have a candidacy which seems to have been largely created by a cartoonist. Garry Trudeau, used his "Doonesbury," to create high voter recognition of Anderson's name especially on college campuses.[4] Cartoonists in earlier campaigns were editorial page satirists and debunkers, and never, so far as I know, open advocates. If Anderson should win or run a 3rd party campaign, as he has hinted, or accept a Vice-Presidential nomination, it will be amusing to see how the candidate will respond to the cartoonists "help" should Trudeau decide to let Michael Doonesbury back Congressman John. Early on Anderson could respond by saying "Any kind of name recognition and media coverage is

helpful when you are as far behind as we are". It will be more difficult when things become serious. In a related 1980 innovation, we have the sitcom genius, Norman Lear, openly supporting Anderson and running full-page ads across the country urging Republicans in States other than Lear's home state to vote for Anderson, because Lear, a lifelong Democrat is changing his party registration to the GOP so he can vote for Anderson in California.[5] Doonesbury and Archie Bunker may become the Kingpins of a new kind of party machine in the future. Another new wrinkle is the multi-candidate debate sponsored by a New Hampshire newspaper and later sponsored by Ronald Reagan when the newspaper sponsor had to back out under charges of unfair practices.

A final difference in media use or coverage of this campaign campared to earlier campaigns is a return to the boring commercial. Perhaps it is a reaction to the overly slick 5 minute mini-documentaries which got Carter nominated or the overly sweet spots gleaned from Ford's half hour campaign film in 1976. In any case there are a number of spots now which feature only the candidate with no music or gimmickry doing a type of spot which is called a "talking head" variety of commercial.[6] They are visually dull but apparently effective for a number of candidates--Reagan uses them; Anderson uses them. And Bush completely junked his cinema verité styled documentary spots featuring Bush as Yale's baseball captain, being rescued at sea in WW II, music and snappy slogans like "A President We Won't Have to Train" in favor of the talking head and eye contact with the camera style. At the same time the underslick spot seems to spell disaster. The best example was Howard Baker's spot featuring the nifty pictures he has taken while pursuing his hobby of amateur photography.[7]

The similarities between media coverage in Campaign '80 and earlier campaigns are easier to describe. We still have the post primary news

features with a special set created for Walter or Dan or John or Roger or Frank. They still come on after the late news and still feature computerized vote projections. We still have on-the-scene interviews with the winners and losers, though with so many primaries, we rarely see a loser this year-only candidates who say they did "as expected" or "better than expected". We still have surrogates for the sitting President taking to the stump while he engages in various bits of diplomacy and party leadership to give the image of competence. Another similarity is the featuring of various candidates on the covers and cover stories of the major news weeklies, beginning with Bush jogging--good for a "front runner"--immediately after the Iowa caucuses and continuing up to the recent covers featuring Reagan. The extended Sunday interview programs are still featuring candidates and the press supposedly sparring over issues and answers. And we still have the various print media that we can generically label as paraphernalia--bumper stickers, hats, nail files, balloons, buttons and badges. None that I have seen are as unusual as Jimmy Carter's 1976 envelope of peanuts with the candidate's face and slogan imprinted. The most unique piece of paraphernalia I've seen this year is a coffee mug with John Anderson's face and date of candidacy imprinted. The posters and posterboards are still red, white and blue or some combination thereof, excepting Carter's use of green and white again, something which he innovated along with the rail-less poster in 1976. In regards to televised spot commercials we see many of the same kinds of messages as have predominated in past campaigns--commercials featuring endorsements from famous celebrities (Paul Newman endorses Anderson, and the spot is aired during afternoon soap opera slots when bored housewives are tuned in--a practice which may get Anderson in trouble with some groups of woman.) An unfortunate endorsement this year was that received by John Connelly from John Mitchell which was

wisely not featured in any spot message. There are the mini-documentary programs such as Carter innovated in 1976.[8] He is pictorially featured working with all sorts of sub-group--minorities, union workers and so on, while the voice over reminds us that "You'll never find yourself wondering if he is telling you the truth." Perhaps this is an attempt to remind voters of Chappaquidick, especially when buttressed by another Carter spot in which Jimmy, Amy and Rosalynn discuss the importance of "good family life" to a good Presidency.[9] A final similarity I'd like to mention is that once again Theodore H. White is traipsing along the campaign path gathering materials for another book on The Making of the President.[10] There are many other similarities, but let's examine the differences and similarities and see if there is some sort of explanation which might be inferred.

James Barber, Duke Professor of Political Science at Duke University, and author or editor of several volumes on the nominating process recently suggested in an article in Psychology Today, based on his recent book, that there is a 12-year cycle in Presidential politics. The cycle consists of three stages which he labels Conflict, Conscience, and Conciliation.[11] Thus in 1960 there is a conflict between two generations in the nominating process and between two leaders of the winning generation--Nixon and JFK in the Election. This is followed four years later by a campaign of conscience following the assassination and focusing on civil rights and moral decay. The moral concerns of 1964 lead to the 1968 campaign which finds LBJ withdrawing, assassination and riot leading to two candidates of conciliation and calls for national unity. The politics of conflict re-emerge in the cycle with the political warfare of Watergate and so on. In this process, Barber notes ". . .political journalism itself supplies the key judgments that shape the key decisions."[12] He also notes the journalistic need for high drama in each of the three recurring stages.

Dramas and metaphors of battle and war are key to the conflict stage with candidates "ambushing" one another or deliver "smashing" defeats to opponents and so on. In the conscience stage, the dramas and metaphors show America living up to its God-given place as a new Eden where the better halves of men can emerge. In 1976 these were seen in A Government as Good as Its People, for example. And in the conciliation stage we find the suspense of Romeo and Juliet getting together in spite of their families depicted in things like Detente or the phrase "National Unity". According to Barber, 1980 is scheduled for the politics of Conciliation, so we ought to see both candidates appealing for national unity, downplaying party differences, and so on. To some degree we are seeing his prediction come true. Iran and Afghanistan have been perfect unifying events for Carter.[13] Reagan emphasized the similarities between the two parties on basic values this past week. Last week he became the first GOP candidate in history to speak before a Serbian Union Hall in Milwaukee. His pollster noted that the Reagan candidacy got 34% of Blue Collar votes in Wisconsin, and for the first time in 24 years GOP voters outnumbered Democrats in Wisconsin's primary by a 60%-40% margin.[14] In part I think this helps to explain what is happening in the mass media coverage of the campaign. The journalists seek out the same themes which the candidates and which perhaps the people seek out -- conflict, conscience or conciliation. Dovetailed with this pattern, though, is the need to keep a very long primary season interesting and unpredictable and a pattern which I call the "multiple copies please" pattern. Television is a mediumwhich relies on carbon copies in its entertainment programs. If a detective series worked this year in the ratings, there will be a dozen detectives next year. If "Skag"

succeeds, we will have hard hat stories on all the networks next year, and so on. The same thing may occur in news coverage of Presidential campaigns. Media reporters look to the most recent Presidential campaign for the scripts or "fantasies" that they should be alert for in this campaign. So in 1980 they place heavy emphasis on the Iowa caucuses since that is where Carter made his first inroads in the 1976 campaign. In 1976 they were looking for a come-from-behind and little-known candidate like the McGovern of 1972. And in 1972 they were looking for an anti-war candidate like the McCarthy of 1968. So there is the "rearview mirror" perspective operating. At the same time, television news coverage sets the agenda in some part for other media. As a result the "rearview mirror" perspective has a ripple effect.

At the same time there seem to only a limited number of potential scripts for a Presidential campaign. They serve as a kind of topoi for the news industry. These are the stock plots which focus the reporter's attention. Here are a few of them: 1.) the front runner is knowed from contention, 2.) the irretrievable blunder or gaffe deals a death blow to a candidacy 3.) the underdog wins with lots of help from "the people" 4.) there is a "palace coup" within a party 5.) the well-oiled machine smoothly and efficiently wins 6.) the well-oiled machine is faulty 7.) the candidate has feet of clay 8.) the people unite to fight a common enemy 9.) the most unusual set of circumstances come together at the right time. And there are others. When we put these stock plots together with Barber's 3-stage trend and the need to maintain audience interest across 37 primaries, it is not surprising to find the media coverage of 1980 doing things like featuring Bush winning in Iowa; Kennedy blundering on the Shah; Bush blundering on the word Facade; Reagan blundering on the multi-candidate debate; the Connelly or Kennedy machines not being well-oiled; Anderson

winning with lots of people help; the people uniting around the president on Iran and Afghanistan and on and on. All of these dramas have great potential to maintain and help keep the entire process more media vital. Thus they help to explain why 1980 is different from and at the same time similar to 1976, 1972, 1968 and so on. I suppose a key issue at the end of such a "mini-theory" of media coverage is: how does media coverage affect overall governmental action, policy and direction. Unfortunately I suspect it may be that Barber is accurate when he notes that the unrealistic supposition is that "He who is good at running for President will be good at running the Presidency".[15] Joseph Napolitan, media consultant for numerous national candidates was once asked how he could justify selling candidates who might not deliver what they promised. His answer is relevant here. Napolitan replied "Well that's government. I don't know anything about government. I'm interested in politics".[16]

Footnotes

1. Alan Baron, "The Turnabout Phenomenon: A Frontrunner's Dilemma," Politics Today, April, 1980, p. 53.

2. Ibid.

3. Sidney Blumenthal, "The Candidate Makers," Politics Today, April, 1980, p. 30.

4. Garry Trudeau, "Doonesbury," Universal Press Syndicated, for 2/20, 3/17, 3/18, 3/20, 3/21, 3/29 and others.

5. Chicago Tribune, March 17, 1980, Section 5, p. 9.

6. Raymond Coffey, "Selling the Candidates," The Chicago Tribune, March 16, 1980, "Perspective" Section.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Politics Today, "People in Politics," April, 1980, p. 17.

11. James David Barber, "Three Old Sagas in American Politics," Psychology Today, March 1980. pp. 61-71.

12. Ibid., p. 64.

13. Ibid., p. 70.

14. Newsweek, April 14, 1980, p. 27.

15. Barber, p. 68.

16. Television And Politics, Bailey Film Associates.